United Nations A/69/264

General Assembly

Distr.: General
6 August 2014

Original: English

Sixty-ninth session
Item 65 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Promotion and protection of the rights of children

Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children

Summary

The present annual report provides, pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/147, an overview of major developments promoted by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children to sustain and scale up efforts to safeguard children's freedom from violence.

* A/69/150.

14-58801 (E) 270814

Please recycle

I. Introduction

1. The present report is framed by the priorities identified by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children for the second term of her mandate (see A/67/230, paras. 100-110). They include mainstreaming the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children[1] (the study) in the national policy agenda and addressing emerging concerns; tackling violence across children's life cycle with priority attention to particularly vulnerable children; and promoting children's protection from violence as a priority in the development agenda. The present report addresses opportunities and risks associated with information and communication technologies as a pressing area of concern.

2. To advance national initiatives and bring the mandate closer to national stakeholders, in 2014 the Special Representative conducted field missions in different regions, most recently to Thailand, Mexico, Jamaica, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Germany, Slovenia, Croatia and Sweden. Country visits provide a valuable opportunity to promote high-level policy discussions with governmental authorities and national parliaments; awareness-raising and advocacy initiatives with professional groups, civil society partners and children; and media encounters. They have been critical in advancing progress in the ratification of human rights treaties; the enactment and enforcement of legislation to ban all forms of violence and protect children therefrom; consolidation of data and research to inform advocacy and policymaking; and initiatives to prevent children's exposure to violence in schools, care and justice institutions, and in the home, and to address incidents associated with harmful practices and community violence.

II. Consolidating progress in the implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations study on violence against children

3. The Special Representative undertook significant initiatives to advance progress in the implementation of the recommendations of the study. They include:

(a) Strengthening the human rights foundation of children's freedom from violence;

(b) Building upon the findings of the Global Survey on violence against children to accelerate progress towards a world free from violence;

(c) Placing child protection from violence at the centre of the post-2015 development agenda.

A. Strengthening the human rights foundation of children's freedom from violence

4. The year 2014 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is a time of commemoration and recognition of the important changes that have taken place in the realization of

[1] A/61/299.

children's rights. Nevertheless, it is also a strategic opportunity to reflect on the persisting challenges that compromise children's development and well-being. Violence against children is one such paradigmatic example.

5. The Convention calls on all Governments to take children seriously and to promote children's rights as a distinct priority in laws and policies, in budget decisions and in daily action by national authorities. Under the Convention, children are envisaged not simply as mere beneficiaries of well-intended actions or recipients of services. They are subjects of rights and actors in decisions affecting their life and development. The protection of children's rights generates responsibilities that must be honoured.

6. Since the adoption of the Convention, extensive changes have been introduced in laws and policies; high-level governmental mechanisms have been set up to coordinate activities, avoid overlap and promote synergy across sectors and levels of administration; ombuds offices have been established in a growing number of countries to safeguard the best interests of the child and address children's complaints; children's rights have been introduced in school curricula, and in training courses of professionals working with and for children; and data on children have helped to grant visibility to children at risk and hidden areas of abuse and neglect.

7. The right of the child to freedom from violence lies at the heart of the Convention. Informed by its process of implementation and capitalizing on the strategic agenda provided by the study, the protection of children from violence has evolved from a largely neglected topic to a growing global concern. Over the past year, this process has been further strengthened.

1. Campaign for the universal ratification and effective implementation of the Optional Protocols to the Convention

8. The consolidation of the normative foundation of children's protection from violence has been a crucial priority for the Special Representative. With the impetus provided by the United Nations campaign for the universal ratification of the Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the special attention given to the rights of the child by the 2013 United Nations Treaty Event, there has been an ever-growing ratification and implementation of standards in this area: the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography has moved steadily closer to universal ratification, being in force in 167 countries; and the third Optional Protocol on a communications procedure, adopted in December 2011, entered into force in April 2014 allowing children to seek remedies and bring complaints before the Committee on the Rights of the Child on alleged violations of children's rights.[2]

9. To enhance children's understanding of the provisions of both Protocols, the Special Representative issued a child-friendly version of these treaties.[3] These easily accessible publications were developed with the involvement of children from different regions, who reviewed and refined the text and layout of the publications. Already translated into 10 national languages, these advocacy tools will help to raise children's awareness about their rights, support the prevention of their exposure to violence and abuse, and give victims confidence to speak up and seek support.

[2] As of 31 July, the protocol had been signed by 45 States and ratified by 11.

[3] http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/children-corner/materials.

Collaboration with Member States and other partners will remain crucial to further consolidate this process and promote the consideration of these child-friendly materials in the education system.

2. United Nations Model Strategies on the Elimination of Violence against Children in the Field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice

10. The protection of children from violence in the justice system figures high in the Special Representative's agenda. Over the past years significant studies have been developed, most recently on restorative justice,[4] and important initiatives supported at the international, regional and national levels. Building upon these efforts, the Special Representative, in collaboration with partners, promoted the development of Model Strategies and Practical Measures on the Elimination of Violence against Children in the field of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.

11. The drafting process was conducted by an intergovernmental open-ended working group, co-chaired by the Governments of Thailand and Austria, and supported by an Inter-Agency Advisory Group composed of the Special Representative, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). These model strategies were adopted by the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in May 2014.[5]

12. The Model Strategies are framed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, its Optional Protocols and United Nations standards in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice, including the United Nations Model Strategies on violence against women,[6] and by research and national experiences across regions.[7]

13. The Model Strategies provide a significant reference for national efforts aimed at a justice system framed by children's rights, and at preventing violence against children and securing victims' protection. They promote children's access to justice and participation in judicial proceedings, and a non-intimidating environment where crime prevention is given serious attention and children's rights are safeguarded at all times, including in situations of deprivation of liberty. Furthermore, they put in place accountability systems to fight impunity.

14. Countless children involved with the criminal justice system as victims, witnesses or alleged offenders have a history of exposure to violence. At times, the criminal justice system is used as a substitute for weak or non-existent child protection systems that lead to the stigmatization and criminalization of girls and boys at risk, including those who are homeless and poor, those living or working on the street, and those who have fled home as a result of violence.

15. Many children are held for minor offences and detained in inhuman conditions where they risk harassment, sexual abuse, and humiliating and degrading treatment by staff, as a form of control, discipline or punishment.

---

[4] http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/page/919.

[5] Resolution 2013/34 to be submitted for action by the General Assembly at its sixty-ninth session.

[6] General Assembly resolution 65/228, annex.

[7] See http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org studies on the juvenile justice system and on child-sensitive counselling, reporting and complaint mechanisms.

16. The Model Strategies provide a significant tool to address those concerns and promote a protective environment to prevent and respond to violence against children.

17. They highlight four crucial dimensions. Firstly, they call for national legislation to include a clear prohibition of all manifestations of violence against children, including its use as a form of discipline, control or sentencing. To support effective enforcement of legislation, they call for information, awareness-raising, social mobilization and communication initiatives which can help to promote change in practices, attitudes and behaviour that condone violence against children (see para. 16).

8. The text recognizes the importance of providing practitioners with a range of appropriate non-custodial measures, such as restorative justice, warning and community-based programmes so that deprivation of liberty is used only as a measure of last resort (see para. 31).

19. Secondly, to prevent girls and boys from being targeted by violence or instrumentalized in criminal activities, the Model Strategies call for a strong and cohesive national child protection system, and recognize the need to address the root causes of child social exclusion and promote children's universal access to basic social services of quality (see paras. 12-17).

20. Institutionalized cooperation and coordination is key for any successful crime prevention programme (see para. 23). For this reason, these new standards promote close cooperation between child protection, child welfare, health and education services, law enforcement and criminal justice agencies.

21. Thirdly, all professionals working with children in the formal and informal justice system should acquire sound knowledge and skills to keep children safe, and to interact with child victims respectfully and effectively. Training modules should be cross-cultural, gender- and child-sensitive, and accompanied by codes of conduct and specialized expertise among criminal justice professionals (see para. 28).

22. Lastly, children's exposure to violence in the criminal justice system often remains invisible, largely unreported and seldom investigated. To reverse this pattern, strong accountability mechanisms are needed to investigate abuses, to secure children's access to safe and child-sensitive counselling, reporting and complaint mechanisms, and to fight impunity (see paras. 43-47). Similarly, data and research are indispensable to promote and assess progress over time.

23. In close cooperation with partners, the Special Representative is committed to promoting the wide dissemination and implementation of the Model Strategies upon their adoption by the General Assembly.

B. Building upon the findings of the Global Survey to accelerate progress towards a world free from violence

24. In 2013, the Special Representative conducted, in collaboration with a wide range of partners, a global survey entitled *Towards a World Free from Violence*.[8] This report was designed to assess progress since the submission of the study on violence against children, to gain perspective on achievements, reflect on good

[8] http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/page/920.

practices and success factors and boost efforts to overcome persistent challenges and accelerate progress in children's protection from violence.

I. Mainstreaming the study recommendations in the national policy agenda

25. The survey confirmed that strategic actions are under way in many countries to advance national implementation of the recommendations in the study. Many States have launched public information campaigns to prevent violence and address attitudes and social norms condoning violence against children. Similarly, there has been an incremental adoption of policy reforms to counter violence against children. Today, close to 90 States have a comprehensive policy agenda, in many cases developed through a participatory process and involving governmental departments, national institutions, civil society and children.

26. Similarly, significant legislative reforms have been promoted to address distinct manifestations of violence against children, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse, bullying in schools, and neglect and maltreatment in institutions and within the home. Since 2006, the number of countries with a comprehensive legal ban on all forms of violence, including corporal punishment, has more than doubled, reaching 39 by July 2014. Brazil is the most recent nation with such a comprehensive legal framework. With its large child population, the enactment of its legislation has led to a visible increase in the proportion of the world's children protected by a legal ban, from 5 to 8 per cent. This process has been accompanied by training initiatives for professional groups and programmes for parents and caregivers to promote positive parenting and non-violent discipline.

27. Data and research are crucial to break the invisibility of violence against children, to challenge its social acceptance, understand its causes and enhance protection of children at risk; and they provide sound evidence to inform legislation and government advocacy, policy, planning and budgeting for effective child protection services. This is an area where many challenges prevail but the recent past has been marked by incremental progress with the development of national surveys addressing the magnitude of this phenomenon, identifying risk and protective factors, and assessing the consequences of violence on children's well-being.

28. National surveys have helped to mobilize a comprehensive national response across multiple sectors, including health, education and social welfare, planning and budgeting, law enforcement and justice. Since the start of the mandate, eight national surveys[9] have been conducted in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean and seven others[10] are being undertaken.

29. Cross-fertilization of knowledge and national experiences has been an important factor of progress. For this reason, in 2014, Swaziland in cooperation with UNICEF and the Together for Girls Partnership, hosted an important meeting at which 20 countries involved in this process gathered to share evidence and reflect on ways of translating national data and research into a multisectoral policy agenda to protect children from violence. The Special Representative will continue to support this process and will join the launch of national data surveys to support the

[9] The United Republic of Tanzania, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Haiti, Cambodia, Malawi, Indonesia, and Nigeria.

[10] Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia, Botswana, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mozambique.

consolidation of the policy agenda and accelerate progress in violence prevention and response.

2. Addressing persisting and emerging challenges

30. Despite these important developments, progress has been too slow and too fragmented to make a genuine breakthrough in the protection of children from violence. The risk of violence remains present in every setting, including where children should be safe — in schools, in care and justice institutions, and within the home.

31. The urgency of safeguarding children's freedom from violence has certainly not diminished and the magnitude of this phenomenon remains high and deeply distressing. Significant United Nations reports illustrate this well:

(a) As highlighted in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime *Global Study on Homicide 2013*, children and young people are highly represented among global homicide rates. Children below the age of 15 represent 8 per cent of the victims and more than half of all violent deaths are young people between 15 and 30 years of age. Clearly, the victims of homicide have a very young face.

(b) In the past few years there has been a marked increase in trafficking in children. From 2007 to 2010, numbers rose from 20 to 27 per cent; in some regions more than 60 per cent of detected victims are children, as indicated in the UNODC 2012 *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* and girls are particularly affected. Child trafficking is a serious form of violence; but it is also a source of incidents of abuse, as children are enslaved into prostitution, sold into marriage, coerced to work in plantations or deep-sea fishing, forced to beg on the street, or recruited by criminal networks.

(c) Exploitation through labour remains particularly worrying. As stressed by the International Labour Organization in the 2013 report *Marking progress against child labour — Global estimates and trends 2000-2012*, 168 million children worldwide are involved in exploitative work; almost half of them are of primary school age and more than 11 million are girls involved in domestic work, often exposed to excessive working hours and hazardous tasks, as well as to violence, abuse and exploitation.

(d) Early and forced marriage affects countless children around the world. Girls are particularly at risk. According to the 2014 UNICEF publication *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*, more than 700 million women worldwide were married before their eighteenth birthday; and more than one third entered into union before the age of 15. Girls living in rural areas or belonging to the most impoverished families face the highest risk.

(e) Violence is present in all regions. According to World Health Organization (WHO) in the 2013 *European report on preventing child maltreatment*, every year, across the European region, child maltreatment leads to the premature death of more than 850 children under 15 years; 18 million children suffer from sexual abuse, 44 million from physical abuse and 55 million from mental abuse. Shocking as these figures may be, it is believed that 90 per cent of child maltreatment may go unnoticed. The impact of violence has been aggravated by the recent economic crisis. Indeed, high levels of unemployment and cuts in child benefits, and in health and welfare services have led to increasing levels of stress,

depression, anxiety and suicide ideation among affected families, constituting a serious risk factor for child neglect and abuse.

32. In strong contrast with the severity of this reality, children often lack information about where to go and what to do, especially when the perpetrator is someone they trust and depend upon. Still too often, child-sensitive counselling, reporting and complaint mechanisms are unavailable or difficult to access. When in place, services frequently lack the needed resources and skills to address children's concerns and promote the healing and reintegration of victims.

3. Tackling violence against particularly vulnerable children

33. For particularly disadvantaged children, often exposed to severe neglect, abuse and ill-treatment, these many challenges become largely unsurmountable. For this reason, the Special Representative has given a great deal of attention to the protection of children at risk, including children with albinism and those accused of witchcraft.

Children with albinism

34. Children with albinism are at high risk of abandonment, stigmatization, and marginalization as a result of their appearance, and due to disability factors associated with their condition, such as impaired eyesight and sensitive skin.

35. In many countries, children with albinism are perceived as a curse, a cause of shame to the family, and a misfortune to the community. Social and structural discrimination condemns these children to a position of extreme vulnerability.

36. Children with albinism are exposed to severe incidents of violence, mutilation and murder. At times they become the target of witchcraft accusations, leading to the use of their body parts for ritual purposes. Children who survive such attacks, are left with serious and long-lasting health and psychological consequences, and the development of their full potential is compromised for life.

37. Driven by fear and superstition, incidences of violence are largely met with silence and indifference. They are rarely reported or followed by investigation or prosecution. Overall, there is a pervasive culture of impunity.

38. To address the alarming cases of discrimination, violence and harmful practices against these children, the Special Representative promoted a strategic partnership with OHCHR, and civil society organizations. Advocacy efforts and policy discussions have led to important results over the past year, including momentous debates within the Human Rights Council, and significant resolutions adopted by the Council[11] and by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.[12] These resolutions convey a clear sense of urgency and set an important reference for mobilizing actions to prevent the abandonment and neglect of these children, to support their well-being and development, and to ensure their freedom from violence.

[11] Human Rights Council resolutions 23/13 on attacks and discrimination against persons with albinism, and 24/33 on technical cooperation for the prevention of attacks against persons with albinism; and the report of the Human Rights Council on persons with albinism (A/HRC/24/57).

[12] Resolution 263 on the prevention of attacks and discrimination against persons with albinism.

Children accused of witchcraft

39. In many communities, children with disabilities and with albinism, children without parental care and specially gifted children are the target of witchcraft accusations. Surrounded by social exclusion, stigma, fear, deep isolation and ostracism, they are branded as witches, in itself a form of psychological violence, and exposed to physical attacks and other manifestations of violence, including starvation, abandonment, amputation of body parts, and death. This phenomenon cuts across all social lines and is being reported across regions.

40. Misfortune and unexpected bad luck, sudden and incurable disease, or death often fuel the belief in witchcraft and the stigmatization of marginalized children. Traditional healers and local leaders may condone witchcraft accusations; and uninformed families may seek assistance to exorcise the child's "evil" spirits. Rituals are surrounded by secrecy and, by fear and superstition, remain hidden and concealed.

A comprehensive strategy to secure effective protection

41. In some countries, important legislative initiatives have addressed violence against children with albinism and those accused of witchcraft, criminalizing harmful practices and issuing protective measures to secure children's safety and protection. Legislation is, however, insufficient to change superstition and deeply rooted beliefs. To ensure the protection of these children, the Special Representative has called for a comprehensive strategy highlighting, the following measures:

(a) **Supporting the protective role of the family**. Parents and members of the extended family play a central role in the care and protection of children and need to be sensitized and supported in their child-rearing responsibilities. To address the social and economic drivers of violence against children with albinism or accused of witchcraft, it is critical to provide basic social services of quality to families concerned, to promote child development, well-being and effective protection, and to prevent children's exposure to harm.

(b) **Empowering children to prevent and address violence**. Marginalized children need to be supported as influential actors in the process of social change aimed at the abandonment of negative attitudes and behaviour against them. Education, information and awareness-raising are indispensable to provide children with the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence necessary to counter violence and discrimination.

(c) **Engaging strategic stakeholders**. The involvement of political, religious, traditional and tribal leaders is crucial in violence prevention and in the care and protection of marginalized children. The association of such influential actors opens avenues to enhance awareness among families and communities about child rights and about the impact and consequences of children's exposure to violence. In turn, this helps to overcome fear, to influence change in violent and discriminatory attitudes and behaviour, and to support children's protection from discrimination, abuse and neglect.

(d) **Ensuring a universal vital registration system**. The universal and mandatory registration of births is indispensable to plan for the basic social services children are entitled to, and provide the special assistance victims of social exclusion particularly need; it helps to secure children's protection; and is crucial to break the invisibility of the violence that these children endure.

(e) **Enacting a clear legal ban against all forms of violence**. In many countries, criminal legislation prohibits serious crimes, such as murder and torture. However, owing to the stigma and superstitious beliefs surrounding children with albinism or accused of witchcraft, additional legislative measures are needed to secure their effective protection. National legislation needs to include a clear and comprehensive prohibition of all forms of violence and harmful practices to protect these marginalized girls and boys, and to provide for means of redress and accountability. Clear provisions on reporting, investigation and prosecution of incidents of violence are essential to fight impunity. Information campaigns and awareness-raising initiatives, and capacity-building of relevant professionals, are equally needed to make the provisions of the law known and effectively enforced, and to overcome deep-rooted social conventions condoning violence.

(f) **There is a need to ensure the recovery and reintegration of child victims**. This is critical and should be promoted in a nurturing environment that fosters children's health, self-respect and dignity, and supports the development of their full potential in life.

(g) **There is a need to consolidate data and research**. Doing so is indispensable to break the invisibility and secrecy of these practices, to inform the development of laws, policies and interventions, and very especially to protect children at risk.

42. As these phenomena illustrate, there is no time for complacency. To build a world free from violence, it is crucial to consolidate the gains that have been made, grasp the lessons learned, and redouble efforts to shape a dynamic process of change. The cost of inaction for every child and for nations' social progress is simply too great to be tolerated. The opportunity for change is too close to be ignored. With the development of the post-2015 agenda, the international community can place the protection of children from violence front and centre in the global development agenda and in the policy action of nations.

C. Placing children's protection from violence at the centre of the post-2015 development agenda

43. As the countdown for achieving the Millennium Development Goals draws closer, the international community is enhancing efforts to narrow persisting gaps and to shape the future sustainable development agenda. That agenda needs to be informed by the lessons learned in the past years and by the concerns voiced by the peoples of the United Nations.

44. One of the lessons from the Millennium Development Goal process is that, despite important progress made, countries affected by violence tend to lag behind. In these countries there is a higher risk of poverty and malnourishment, higher levels of child mortality, poorer health and higher rates of children out of school.

45. Violence against children is not a new topic in the development agenda. It is a core dimension of the right to freedom from fear, proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and highlighted by the Millennium Declaration and the process generated thereafter. Yet, the lack of a distinct goal within the Millennium Development Goals has compromised efforts to mobilize action and support for prevention of violence and for children's protection. And it hampered

progress in related goals addressing poverty eradication, gender equality, maternal health, child mortality, education and HIV/AIDS.

46. This situation can be changed this time around. As noted in its report, the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda stated that "to fulfil our vision of promoting sustainable development, we must go beyond the Millennium Development Goals. They did not focus enough on reaching the very poorest and most excluded people. They were silent on the devastating effects of conflict and violence on development."[13]

47. The urgency of addressing violence against children emerged as a strong concern in numerous national, regional and thematic consultations that were held in preparation of the post-2015 development agenda. "My World", the United Nations global survey for a better world, shows that protection against violence ranks high among all population groups in all regions. This includes thousands of children involved in these consultations who have steadily conveyed a clear message: violence is a major obstacle to child development and well-being and it needs to be brought to an end.

48. This concern has been equally echoed by the important process promoted by the General Assembly Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals. In its proposal to the Assembly, violence against children is given distinct attention, both as a component of peaceful and inclusive societies, and as a cross-cutting dimension of other goals, including education, gender equality and empowerment and decent work.

49. As this process reflects, there is a wide consensus on the urgency of addressing violence against children. Indeed, freedom from violence is indispensable to sustainable development, to a future in which children can grow up healthy, well-nourished, resilient, well-educated, culturally sensitive and effectively protected from neglect, abuse and exploitation.

50. Violence compromises social progress and is often associated with poor rule of law, weak law enforcement, high levels of organized crime and homicide rates, and also with a culture of impunity. For children, violence goes hand in hand with deprivation, with high risks of poor health, poor school performance and long-term welfare dependency.

51. In early childhood, the impact of violence is often irreversible, damaging the development of the brain, compromising children's physical and mental health, and in serious cases leading to disability and death. As children grow up, the cumulative exposure to various manifestations of violence often becomes a continuum, spilling over from one context to another, spreading across children's life cycle and persisting across generations.

52. Violence is equally associated with high costs for society. It diverts billions of dollars from social spending, slows economic development and erodes nations' human and social capital. In a matter of hours, violence can destroy development gains that took years to achieve.

[13] See *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development*, executive summary.

53. The question at hand is how best to reflect the protection of children from violence in the post-2015 sustainable development agenda; and how to re-energize commitment and action to leverage progress in the years to come. Three important steps are needed to move in this direction.

54. First, it is crucial to mobilize the voice and support of leaders in all areas, and secure sound resources to safeguard protection of children from violence. The human dignity of children and their right to protection from violence must be at the heart of this global effort, just as they must be at the heart of national strategies.

55. Secondly, building upon the significant efforts promoted within and beyond the United Nations system, it is indispensable to promote sound monitoring tools and indicators to accelerate and monitor progress in children's protection from violence. It is indeed high time to measure what is treasured.

56. Thirdly, it is imperative to include in this process those who are most affected. Children and young people need to be provided with genuine opportunities and platforms to influence the road ahead — not simply on accidental occasions, but as true partners and agents of change. Recognizing the value of their contribution, the Special Representative joined civil society partners in the development of a report which captures the concerns and recommendations conveyed by child participants in the post-2015 sustainable development process.

57. In the year of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the international community has a golden opportunity to place child well-being and development at the heart of this agenda. This will help to generate unprecedented efforts and resources to achieve the sustainable development of all nations.

D. Reinforcing regional processes in support of national implementation efforts

58. The strengthening of collaboration with regional organizations and institutions is a cornerstone of the Special Representative's strategy. Regional partnerships have helped to maximize the engagement with Governments and develop policy platforms to promote cross-fertilization of experiences, to consolidate national action for children's protection from violence, and mobilize support to advance this agenda.

Cross-Regional Round Table on violence against children

59. Acting as a bridge-builder between regions, the Special Representative every year convenes a Cross-Regional Round Table on violence against children. At this important annual forum, regional organizations and institutions assess progress, reflect on trends and common concerns, share planned initiatives and identify opportunities for cross-regional cooperation. In 2014 the Round Table addressed the prevention and elimination of violence in early childhood.

60. Organized in cooperation with UNICEF and the Government of Jamaica, the meeting gathered representatives of the Caribbean Community, MERCOSUR, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the Council of the Baltic Sea States, the League of Arab States and the Latin-American and Caribbean Movement for Children. Representatives from the Government of Jamaica, and from national institutions, academia, civil society

organizations and Jamaican children shared their expertise, concerns and recommendations for accelerating progress in the prevention and elimination of young children's exposure to violence.

61. Regional representatives reported on new strategies, legislative reforms, information campaigns and in-depth studies to advance implementation of the study recommendations. Recognizing the crucial importance of early childhood for children's development and well-being, regional organizations and institutions expressed commitment to further strengthen their cooperation to prevent and address violence, abuse and neglect in early years; to raise awareness and document good practices on positive parenting and positive discipline, and on the negative impact of violence on children's development and well-being. They further committed to mobilize political engagement to protect children from violence, neglect and abuse, including through the development of national, multisectoral integrated strategies and comprehensive legislation to ban all forms of violence; to adopt policies and programmes to support families and caregivers in their child-rearing responsibilities and prevent child abandonment and placement in residential care; and to consolidate data and research to inform decision-making.

62. Over the past year, cooperation with the African Union Labour and Social Affairs Commission and the African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child gained a renewed relevance with the launch, in May 2014, of the Campaign and Call to Action to End Child Marriage in Africa. The Campaign and the national launches anticipated in 10 countries provide a sound basis for this important collaboration and for enhancing regional initiatives in support of the abandonment of harmful practices against children.

63. The partnership with the Central American Integration System was further advanced with the participation of the Special Representative at the Ministerial Meeting of the Commission on Security, held in May in the Dominican Republic. The meeting provided a strategic platform to discuss the impact on children of armed violence, drug trafficking and organized crime, including in the context of migration to identify measures to address these serious manifestations of violence. One important outcome was the agreement to include these dimensions in the Central American Strategy on Security.

64. In the framework of her cooperation with the Council of Europe, in March 2014, the Special Representative participated in the High Level Conference held in Dubrovnik (Croatia), which reviewed progress in the implementation of the Council's Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2012-2015. The elimination of violence against children is one of its core objectives. Framed by the sound normative work of the Council, including on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, on cybercrime and on gender and domestic violence, the meeting promoted the further implementation of the vast array of policy guidelines, training programmes and awareness campaigns for violence prevention and response. As a follow-up, enhanced efforts will be made to support positive parenting, child participation and empowerment in the digital world, and child-friendly justice, social services and health care. Moreover, the Council was invited to address the vulnerability of children impacted by the economic crisis in Europe; and the role of education, media and advertising in preserving children's human dignity, and combating gender stereotypes and sexual violence.

III. Information and communication technologies and violence against children: minimizing risks and releasing children's potential

65. The Special Representative identified the opportunities and risks associated with information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a priority concern for her mandate (see A/68/274, paras. 63-65). This topic was equally highlighted by several countries in their responses to the global survey on violence against children. Indeed, Governments stressed the importance of adapting laws, policies and practices to the evolving challenges generated by fast-developing technology, and expressed the need for research, data and international cooperation forums where common concerns could be addressed.

66. To reflect on these questions, the Special Representative organized an international expert consultation in June 2014, in San Jose, Costa Rica. The consultation was informed by research conducted with children in Europe and Latin America, and by the growing body of knowledge and experience of a wide range of actors participating in the meeting, including Governments, United Nations agencies, national independent institutions for children's rights, and representatives from civil society, academia and the private sector.

67. The Special Representative's upcoming report entitled "ICTs and violence against children: minimizing risks and releasing children's potential" builds upon this process. The sections below highlight key dimensions of that report.

Children and the digital world

68. Travelling faster and communicating better were the aspirations behind many of the greatest human inventions: the wheel, paper, the printing press, the steam engine, the telephone, the airplane, the Internet. Today, ICTs offer endless opportunities to both adults and children to connect to knowledge and people. At the same time, as with previous inventions, the technology is often associated with some degree of fear or apprehension, because of real or imagined inherent risks.

69. In 1989, when the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the General Assembly, the Internet was still in its infancy. It was during that same year that the World Wide Web was developed, providing a new technique for distributing online information. The term Internet had been used for the first time only seven years earlier.

70. The reach of the Internet has increased ever since. By the end of 2014, the number of Internet users will have reached almost 3 billion, with two thirds of them living in countries in the South, where the number of users will have doubled in only five years.

71. ICTs have profound effects upon societies around the world. They bridge physical distance, create new ways of communicating, learning, doing business and delivering services. For children and young people, ICTs represent an enormous opportunity, offering new means of experiencing creative processes of education, social interaction and entertainment. Children recognize the potential of online information, and many understand digital literacy to be an important skill for their adult life.

72. ICTs open avenues to learn about children's rights and about ways of securing children's protection. They provide opportunities for young people to access information from institutions, including Ombuds offices; and to seek advice from child helplines, to report incidents of violence and ask for help when they feel at risk.

73. Alongside their unique potential, ICTs are associated with risks, making children vulnerable to harmful information, bullying, abuse and exploitation in ways that are sometimes difficult to detect and respond to, including by families and caregivers, teachers and others.

74. Indeed, harmful material and information, including violent, sexually explicit or hateful content, become available more easily and may also spread more quickly, potentially reaching millions in a fraction of a second and remaining in cyberspace for a lifetime. Violence, abuse and exploitation may take place in spaces that do not come under adult supervision, including when children go online from mobile devices or in Internet cafes; and parents and caregivers may struggle to keep up with technological developments, especially in countries where digital literacy is low.

Maximizing the potential and minimizing risks is crucial for all children

75. Across regions, more and more children use ICTs at an increasingly young age. Children navigate online for longer hours, alone or without adult guidance or supervision. Although this enhances children's digital literacy, it equally exposes them to risks.

76. According to significant research conducted in Europe by EU Kids Online, more than 70 per cent of children 9 to 16 years old use the Internet; in some countries this figure rises to more than 90 per cent. In a recent survey conducted with adolescents in nine countries in Latin America,[14] the vast majority recognized the potential of the Internet for enjoying access to cultural activities, supporting their studies and carrying out group work for school through virtual connections; and significantly, more than 80 per cent considered quality access to the Internet as a fundamental human right. As many of them highlighted, "technology is not bad; it depends on the use one makes of it".

77. In countries in the North, Internet access is more frequent from home, at times through a shared family computer; children also use their own laptop or mobile phone in the privacy of their bedroom. In the global South, access is often from Internet cafes or from mobile devices, creating new challenges for children's safety.

78. Pushing boundaries, exploring new experiences beyond adult scrutiny, and testing capacities to cope with adversity are common characteristics of adolescence. But when new technologies are involved, parents and caregivers express concerns and insecurity, especially when they have limited experience of those technologies and lack the skills to counter the risks their children may encounter.

79. Maximizing the potential of ICTs and minimizing possible risks is a crucial concern shared across regions. This is relevant for all ages, including very young children, among whom the use of new technologies is growing rapidly. Indeed, touchscreen devices and smart phones are making the Internet easily accessible to toddlers and preschoolers.

[14] Research on children's use of the Internet in Latin America, conducted by RedNatic for the Expert Consultation in June 2014.

80. There is still much to learn about how the youngest children engage with the digital universe but, according to available research, the frequent use of touchscreen devices in kindergarten is associated with vocabulary development and academic achievement. Digital literacy skills lead to stronger creativity, self-expression and improved interpersonal relations, and provide a foundation for the responsible use of technologies.

81. Older children are equally active, using ICTs to prepare schoolwork, search for information, socialize with friends, play games, watch the news and video clips online, and to communicate, including through e-mail and instant messaging.

82. Differently from previous generations, today's children tend to shift easily between "real" and "virtual" worlds and regard the online/offline distinction as ever less relevant. At the same time, ICTs are contributing to the deconstruction of traditional boundaries of privacy, creating situations in which children engage in "chat" or "conversation" in apparently private settings while in fact potentially exposing themselves to a wide and unknown audience. Sharing personal information, and failing to identify online dangers or warning signals that can serve to protect children in the physical world — including physical and behavioural cues, and the appraisal of friends, parents or caregivers which are largely absent online — may lead to multiple risks to children's protection. The consequences of online and offline abuse can be devastating and they are also similar. In both cases they lead to depression, fear, eating and sleeping disorders, aggression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and a sense of shame and guilt.

Child rights online

83. The Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols, notably the Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography provide important guidance for the realization of children's rights online. All measures, including legislative, policy and educational initiatives, should be guided by the best interests of the child; respect and support children's growing autonomy and agency, and protect children from violence and discrimination. These principles lay the foundation to capitalize on the potential of the online environment; to promote children's learning and freedom of expression; to support children in accessing, receiving and imparting information; and to protect them from harmful materials and information, from unlawful interference with their privacy or correspondence, and situations where their honour and reputation may be at risk.

84. Framed by these standards, children can also capitalize on the potential of ICTs to access information on the promotion of their rights, and seek support and redress when exposed to violence, abuse and exploitation.

85. Protection from discrimination is a fundamental principle that gains special relevance in the online world. Indeed, it is crucial that all children, including the most marginalized, enjoy the same degree of access to the Internet and benefit from the protection they all require. This is particularly important as the Internet has opened up a digital divide among children, those who have ready and convenient access to the Internet at home, school and elsewhere, and those who do not; those who regularly benefit from guidance and advice from their parents or schools, and those who explore cyberspace on their own and lack any support; and those who are confident and proficient users of the Internet and those who are not.

86. Child victims of violence, whether online or offline, come from all walks of life. But, factors such as age, disability or social exclusion can have an important bearing on children's online activities, and on children's ability to cope with potential risks.

87. Younger children may lack the capacity to identify risks. Other vulnerable children, including those out of school, who come from a low socioeconomic background or belong to a minority, and children with disabilities, may be less likely to enjoy the benefits offered by the online environment or to receive information regarding safe Internet use. They may also be more likely to be bullied, harassed or exploited online. Without decisive action, the digital divide threatens to reinforce or exacerbate existing patterns of disadvantage.

The past years have been marked by the adoption of significant standards to combat cybercrime and protect children from risks online, including the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and important regional legal instruments. The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse is the first treaty to address children's protection from sexual violence in the face of challenges presented by technological developments, and to identify as an offence the solicitation of children for sexual purposes through ICTs, often known as "grooming". The Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime criminalizes offences against and through computer systems, including child pornography; provides law enforcement with effective means to investigate cybercrime and secure electronic evidence; and offers a framework for international police and judicial cooperation in computer-related cases involving crimes against children. Both conventions can be adhered to by States from other regions.

Combating cybercrime is also addressed by the 2001 Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Offences related to Computer Information, developed by the Commonwealth of Independent States; and the 2010 Arab Convention on Combating Information Technology Offences, promoted by the League of Arab States. The African Union's draft Convention on the Establishment of a Legal Framework Conducive to Cybersecurity in Africa anticipates the criminalization of cybercrime activities, including computer-related harassment, extortion or causing personal harm, and the production, distribution or possession of child pornography.

Understanding online risks and harm

88. A degree of risk is inherent in the use of ICTs, but the risk does not inevitably translate to harm for children and young people. The more children engage in online activities, the more they gain skills and resilience, and become self-confident. In turn, the more skills they possess, the more opportunities they explore with greater chances to become confronted with associated risks. More skills can, however, also reduce the harm that children experience, and help children better cope with such risks.

89. Most children do not report being bothered or upset by going online, and most risks are encountered by a minority of children. But when harm arises, the impact on a child can be devastating, especially as multiple forms of abuse and exploitation can take place simultaneously or be committed against the same victim over time.

90. Risks may be associated with online content, for instance when the child is exposed to violent or racist messages, or child abuse images; they may constitute contact risks, e.g., through harassment or grooming; and risks of conduct, when the child generates or disseminates harmful content, bullies or promotes hostile peer activities.

91. **Violent content**. The Internet harbours a vast range of material that, while not necessarily illegal, is potentially harmful to children and young people. Many children are particularly concerned about violent, aggressive or scary online content, including images of physical violence, torture and suicide, descriptions of war and atrocities, domestic abuse and violence, and cruelty to animals.

92. **Hateful or otherwise harmful material**. Easily accessible material available on the Internet may encourage, tacitly or explicitly, harmful attitudes and behaviour among children and adolescents. This includes information that promotes hate and discrimination on the basis of race, religion and sexual orientation, or that contributes to the hypersexualization of children. Children's exposure to online information that addresses suicide, eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia, dangerous games that put life at risk, and drug use are additional reasons for concern.

93. **Child sexual abuse and exploitation**. ICTs have significantly facilitated the production, distribution and possession of child abuse images and, with rapidly developing technology, perpetrators are growing in numbers while child victims face increased harm.

94. The magnitude and scale of child abuse images on the Internet has reached an unprecedented level, with many individual offenders in possession of millions of such images. This is facilitated by the rise of mobile "smart" phones, while encrypted networks allow sex offenders to share child sexual abuse materials undetected, bringing added challenges to criminal investigations and prosecutions.

95. Tourism development and information technologies are also enhancing children's vulnerability to sexual abuse, including by making remote areas more accessible to tourists. The increased use of live video streaming of sexual abuse of children is another emerging trend, allowing families with cheap Internet access and computer equipment provided by travelling offenders to make money by streaming video footage of their very young children. There is also a rise in cases of children lured with money or gifts by preying offenders who entice children to share photos of themselves.

96. Young victims are often the target of these practices. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, between 2011 and 2012 there was a 70 per cent increase in child sexual abuse material focused on girls under the age of 10 years, and abuse material involving toddlers or babies is not uncommon. Once online, child abuse images can circulate indefinitely, alongside the risk of perpetuating victims' harm. The circulation of such images contributes to the hypersexualization of children and in turn fuels the demand for sexual abuse material.

97. **Inappropriate contact and online grooming**. The anonymity of much online interaction, combined with the lack of social cues that condition face-to-face interaction, facilitates inappropriate advances on the part of adults towards children online. Grooming takes place when online contact with children involves premeditated behaviour intended to secure their trust and cooperation with the intention of engaging in sexual conduct.

98. **Cyberbullying**. Cyberbullying may include spreading rumours, posting false information or nasty messages, embarrassing comments or photos, or excluding someone from online networks. Often resulting from face-to-face interaction in the school or other social spaces, it can cause profound harm, as it can affect the child victim at any time and quickly reach a very wide audience.

99. **Self-exposure**. Sending explicit self-generated text or images by mobile phone or instant messenger, known as "sexting", is becoming widespread. As a result of peer pressure or as part of online interaction, there is a real risk of such material falling into the wrong hands and used to harass young people, or blackmailing them into engaging in further risky behaviour. According to the Internet Watch Foundation, up to 88 per cent of self-generated sexually explicit content online has been taken from its original location and uploaded elsewhere on the Internet.

100. **Other concerns**. Obsessive online behaviour or excessive use of the Internet may have a deleterious effect on children's health and social skills. At times, this may be associated with an addiction to online gambling or gaming, which are often violent and age-inappropriate. Online gaming communities can also be used by paedophiles seeking to make contact with children, or by bullies as a platform for abusive behaviour.

101. Children may also make purchases online, enter agreements, sign up for premium services or make other forms of payments without the involvement of their parents or caregivers. In addition, children may be exposed to online fraud and viruses, and other risks that may threaten their privacy and safety and damage their computers and devices.

102. Another emerging concern is the association of children and adolescents with cybercrime. This may include young men's engagement in computer-related financial fraud, or the use of ICTs to facilitate illicit behaviour that may result in violence against themselves or others. For example, in the context of youth gangs, sexual images exchanged on mobile phones may become "currency" for gang members, and mobile phones can be used to exert control over others and the commission of violent acts, including sexual violence. With the increasing engagement of organized criminal groups in cybercrime activities, there is a real risk that young people may become drawn into online criminal activities, driven by bravado, attracted by promises of economic gain, or compelled by threats or coercion.

A multifaceted agenda for minimizing online risks and releasing children's potential

103. The challenge of creating a safe and empowering online environment for children lies in responses that strike the appropriate balance between ensuring that children benefit from the potential offered by ICTs, and securing their necessary protection.

104. Children's online protection calls for multidimensional and concerted prevention efforts, effective detection, reporting and prosecution of offences, and assistance to victims, including their recovery and reintegration. National authorities, families, schools, civil society and the corporate sector are key actors in this process, and children's empowerment and active contribution to their own protection lies at the heart of these efforts.

105. To consolidate progress in this fast-changing area, it is crucial to pursue a multifaceted agenda with special emphasis on the dimensions described below.

Empowering children

106. Any online safety initiatives aimed at children, and adolescents in particular, must recognize their crucial role in this process. Children master ICTs with ease but they need to gain skills and confidence, to feel reassured when they explore the borders of the digital universe and when they encounter issues of concern.

107. As young people stressed during the 2013 Global Youth Summit promoted by the International Telecommunication Union, more than simply trying to avoid online threats, it is important to develop children's capacities as digital citizens; and promote solid values and life skills, including a strong sense of responsibility, respect and concern for others. Rather than curtailing children's natural curiosity and sense of innovation for fear of encountering risks online, it is critical to tap into children's resourcefulness and enhance their resilience while exploring the potential of the Internet.

108. A positive, caring and protective family environment, a supportive community, access to relevant and child-friendly information and services, including to report online abuse, as well as children's own evolving capacities, are crucial factors to achieve this goal.

Supporting parents and caregivers

109. Informed and engaged parents and caregivers who support and advise children in their access to the Internet and the use of ICTs open avenues for a safer online experience. Parents' effective mediation minimizes risk without limiting children's skills or opportunities. Taking time to surface the cyberuniverse together, to guide and reassure their children, and to provide age-appropriate rules about online conduct are crucial dimensions of this process. Equally important is to raise children's awareness of online risks and provide guidance on ways of addressing them when they occur.

110. But for this to happen, parents and caregivers need support and advice to reduce anxiety and to gain understanding of the online world and of how children operate in this environment, the risks they might encounter, the harm that can potentially ensue and, crucially, the most effective ways to cope and develop children's resilience.

Capitalizing on schools' potential

111. Schools have a unique potential to promote non-violent behaviour and to support change of attitudes condoning violence. Through quality education, children can gain the skills and abilities to surf cyberspace with confidence, to avoid and address risks, and to become well-informed and responsible digital citizens. This

includes promoting creative, critical and safe use of the Internet and preventing and responding to incidents of online violence, including cyberbullying, even when they were not originated in the school environment.

112. Promoting digital literacy in schools can also leverage efforts aimed at children's social inclusion and narrow the digital divide affecting the most vulnerable children, those who otherwise are less likely to enjoy the benefits of new technologies or access information promoting safe Internet use.

113. Especially in remote areas, schools can also become a bridge between a child's home and his or her community, an environment where students, parents and other community members meet to gain digital literacy and confidence, and to benefit from ICT-based training on life skills, social and economic empowerment and entrepreneurship.

114. This process is, however, strongly dependent on the extent to which teachers themselves understand the online environment and benefit from the needed skills and training to advise, guide, empower and support children and young people, to identify early signals of abuse, and to report and follow up on such cases in an ethical and child-sensitive manner. This is an area where strong investment is needed.

Joining efforts with civil society

115. In many countries, cooperation with civil society organizations has been critical to widen online literacy and safety, especially among children and their families: to raise awareness and enhance children's digital citizenship; to promote responses to harm when it is committed, as well as to capture, through surveys conducted with young people, children's experiences, fears, expectations and online behaviour. In turn, these efforts have generated important advocacy and action by children themselves.

116. Through information, capacity-building and research initiatives, operating helplines and providing support to child victims, and through engagement in policy and legislative reforms, civil society partners have been a decisive contributor to national and international efforts that seek to build a safe online environment for children.

Consolidating partnerships with the corporate sector

117. The corporate sector is an essential driver for societies and economies and can actively contribute to violence prevention, to minimizing risks and securing online protection for children. This is particularly important as their services or products can be used to expose children to online abuse, including violent content, cyberbullying and sexting, grooming or sexual abuse.

118. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights[15] and the Children's Rights and Business Principles,[16] together with the General Comment of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on States' obligations regarding the impact of the business sector on children's rights,[17] provide an important framework

[15] www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf.

[16] www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/issues_doc/human_rights/CRBP/Childrens_rights_and_Business_Principles.pdf.

[17] CRC/C/GC/16.

to guide work in this area, addressing the safety of children and preventing the risk of harm, abuse or exploitation. The ITU/UNICEF Guidelines for Industry on Child Protection Online constitute a sound reference to promote the positive use of the Internet and mechanisms for reporting and grievance; and to encourage safe and age-appropriate awareness and education for children, parents and teachers. In this area, significant self-regulatory initiatives have equally gained ground. Similarly, strategic platforms such as the Global Child Forum periodically gather leading corporations to promote children's rights and enhance online safety for children.

119. Nevertheless, more consistent protection tools are needed, including to address child sexual abuse material and harmful content to children, age verification and guidance on child safety addressed to children and parents. With this aim, a CEO Coalition of leading companies was launched in 2011 to promote a better and safer Internet for children.

120. Promising as these developments may be, in such a fast-changing universe it remains essential to pursue the effective implementation, periodic evaluation and further improvement of this framework, both to secure children's safety and to seize the potential of the digital world.

Building upon States' accountability to secure children's online protection

121. Governments have a leading responsibility in the realization of children's rights. This includes violence prevention and children's online protection.

122 Capitalizing on the significant process of implementation of the recommendations of the study on violence against children, the children's digital agenda should be integrated as a core component of the national comprehensive, well-coordinated and well-resourced policy framework to prevent and address all forms of violence against children. As highlighted above, to be effective this agenda requires the involvement of all stakeholders and must be informed by the views and experiences of children and young people online, including those exposed to abuse.

123. National legislation is a core component of this process. Indeed, legislation is indispensable to enable children's access to the Internet and ICTs and enjoyment of digital literacy without discrimination of any kind. The law is also crucial to ban all forms of violence in all settings, including cyberspace. It secures children's protection, providing for effective remedies, recovery and reintegration to address online harm, abuse or exploitation; and it establishes child-sensitive counselling, reporting and complaint mechanisms and procedures, as well as mechanisms to fight impunity.

124. Although it is flexible in order to avoid constant updating, legislation needs to convey a clear message of prohibition of all manifestations of violence; it needs to address loopholes associated with emerging concerns, including new forms of online abuse such as grooming, and develop procedures in criminal proceedings to facilitate investigation and prosecution.

125. The accountability of States is equally important to set a clear regulatory framework for the activities of corporations and to support businesses to meet their responsibilities in the safeguard of children's rights, throughout their operations, at home and abroad.

126. To advance implementation of the law, professionals working with and for children, including teachers and law enforcement officials, should benefit from capacity-building initiatives to gain skills and expertise to support children's digital literacy, to alert children to online risks they may face, to identify early signals of abuse and required steps to address them in an ethical and child-sensitive manner.

127. Similarly, it is vital to promote awareness and give children, parents and caregivers the skills to enable them to seek opportunities and prevent and manage harm associated with ICTs. Balancing children's empowerment and protection is critical, and strategies to reduce risks should not hamper children's online opportunities or their learning to cope with risks.

128. Data and research are also of essence. Over the past years, significant studies have been conducted on children's online safety and risks. But in this fast-changing area, sound evidence is needed to inform law, policy and actions; it is crucial to gain deeper understanding of children's evolving skills, practices and concerns; and knowledge gaps need to be addressed. Indeed, studies have often focused on problems and concerns, but less on online opportunities and the long-term consequences of risks. Similarly, few studies have been conducted in countries in the South and less is known about how very young children engage with ICTs. These are areas where change has been fastest and where the need to minimize risks is particularly felt.

IV. Looking ahead

129. Over the past year, the Special Representative pursued her global advocacy work with strategic partners within and beyond the United Nations system, acting as a bridge-builder and a catalyst for action across regions, sectors and settings where violence against children may occur, and promoting the protection of children from violence as a human rights imperative.

130. The present report presents an overview of the strategic initiatives that the Special Representative developed to advance progress in the implementation of the study recommendations. These initiatives have helped to further consolidate cross-regional commitments to children's protection from violence and strengthen national advocacy, legal and policy action aimed at the prevention and elimination of violence.

131. The Special Representative will continue to mobilize support to consolidate these important efforts and will address priority areas of concern. They include violence against children as a distinct concern in the global development agenda, prevention of violence in early childhood, and protection of children and adolescents affected by community and armed violence and organized crime.

132. The Special Representative looks forward to pursuing her collaboration with Member States and all other stakeholders in the further strengthening of this agenda and the building of a world free from violence.